

PART 2: Factors that May Impact ELLs' Academic Progress, Linguistic Development, and Response to Instruction & Intervention

One way to make a school's existing multi-tiered system of support more culturally and linguistically responsive is to consider the sociocultural context for learning. School districts can develop a protocol for proactively gathering important descriptive information about all the students they serve. This guide proposes that the protocol include information along seven factors that may influence students' academic achievement, linguistic development (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) across the content areas, and responses to instruction and intervention. This information will help school teams develop appropriate instruction, interventions, and assessments for those students who are not performing as would be expected during their culturally and linguistically responsive core instructional time. Figure 2 below lists seven factors to consider for ELLs during the solution-seeking process. While information along these seven factors is important to gather for all students, this section will focus solely on ELLs and how the factors provide an **authentic context** in which to understand ELL student performance.

Seven factors that may influence ELLs' linguistic and academic development

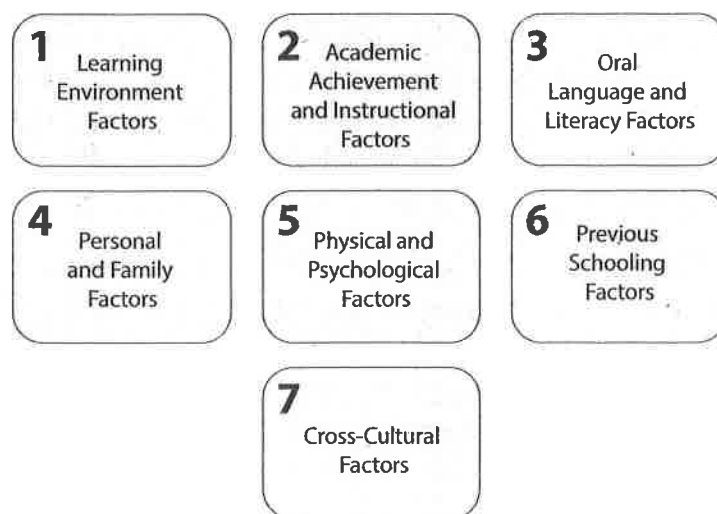


Figure 2. Adapted from: Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez, & Damico (2013)

Considering the Sociocultural Context for ELLs' Performance in School: Seven Integral Factors

#1: Learning Environment Factors

"Opportunity to learn" (Gee, 2008) refers to equitable conditions or circumstances within the school or classroom that promote learning for all students. It includes careful consideration of what curricula are chosen, that the learning materials are culturally and linguistically responsive, that the physical learning facilities are equitable, and that teachers who work with diverse learners are appropriately certified and have ongoing opportunities to learn about their students' unique educational needs. This term also relates to ongoing efforts,

innovations, and reforms that begin to remove barriers to learning for all students. "Opportunity to learn the designated curriculum for a grade level or age group is a major equity issue for students who are at risk of not developing academically to their fullest potential" (Stevens & Grymes, 1993).

The learning environment created for ELLs is the most comprehensive of the seven factors. Within the learning environment, there are aspects that are unique to educating ELLs and should be discussed when seeking solutions for these students:

- **Teachers:** Ensure that ELLs spend the majority of their instructional day with teachers who are knowledgeable about the acquisition of a second or additional language (Hill & Flynn, 2006) and have received professional development and/or coursework in delivering culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. School districts can support teachers to gain advanced coursework and credentials in the area of ESL/bilingual education as well as establishing those structures (e.g., common planning time, professional learning communities) that allow for meaningful collaboration among all teachers (ESL/bilingual, general education, and special education) to enhance all educators' abilities to address a range of diverse student needs (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Hamayan et al., 2013).
- **Services & Resources:** The human, material, and physical resources provided to ELLs should be comparable with those provided for all students. For example, multi-level reading materials that support all the content areas help ELLs gain access to the curriculum. The quality of the classroom space in which ELLs are taught can also have an impact on their achievement. What is important is that the programming ELLs receive is coordinated and implemented in a cohesive manner in order to maximize meaningfulness and comprehensibility.
- **Service Delivery Models:** Research has found that (1) ELLs benefit from receiving services that provide instruction in their home language while they are also taught academic English (Greene, 1998); (2) ELLs benefit when they are in service delivery models that allow for the English portion of their day to be made comprehensible through sheltered instruction (Echevarria et al., 2012); and (3) ELLs benefit the most academically when they are provided high-quality, sustained academic language instruction in English (Collier & Thomas, 2002).
- **Role of Home Language:** ELLs' home languages support the acquisition of English, and so it is crucial that schools begin by raising the prestige of students' home languages within the school environment. When educators and school communities value ELLs' home languages, these students are more likely to continue using these languages at home and at school while they are in the process of developing English. Another important strategy is to ask students to preview (think about, discuss, research, etc.) material or concepts in their home languages to the greatest extent possible, and then to bridge to the English component of the lesson (Beeman & Urow, 2012). There are many ways that monolingual educators can support multilingualism on an everyday basis (Schecter & Cummins, 2003).
- **Role of Home Culture:** School teams must assess how culturally responsive they are to the diverse students in their schools. What steps have been taken in developing a process of **cultural reciprocity** (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999a; Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999b; Warger, 2001) in school policies and by the school personnel at all levels? What is the curriculum and does it reflect the diverse experiences of the students? Are students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds viewed as resources and **funds of knowledge** (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992)?

- **Role of Instruction and Assessment:** Students should be able to practice and show what they know in multiple modalities and in all of their languages both orally and in writing. Many ELLs know, understand, and can express different ideas, processes, and concepts in each of their languages depending on the contexts in which they were learned and experienced (Beeman & Urow, 2012; Escamilla, 2000; Pearson, 1998; Pearson, Fernández, & Oller, 1993). When interpreting student performance, it is essential that educators consider the potential limitations of standardized assessment tools that are not normed on diverse populations. A balanced assessment system in a district will support both instructional assessment as well as summative, large-scale assessment. Both should be valued in decision-making (Gottlieb & Nguyen, 2007).

#2: Academic Achievement and Instructional Factors

When developing instructional units of study, teachers and other personnel can collaboratively plan how they will systematically integrate academic language and literacy instruction into each of their content lessons through clearly stated language and content objectives (Commins & Miramontes, 2005). Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2004) represent one strategy that can support this process by helping teams examine:

- Where these students seem to flourish and share these “bright spots” with all staff (Heath & Heath, 2010);
- Where and how students are able to show what they know across the curriculum;
- What particular contexts present the most challenges for ELLs;
- Ways that both ELLs’ academic language development and their academic achievement are supported.

When ELLs are assessed on their content knowledge (academic achievement), good assessments look primarily at what the students know and can do in the content area without interference from their English language proficiency and literacy levels. Authentic, project-based assessments are best suited to help ELLs show what they have actually learned in the content areas. Before ELLs reach a high level of academic language proficiency (between a composite score of 4.8 to 5.2 and above on the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency test) traditional English academic achievement tests (e.g., multiple-choice or true/false formats) may not capture students’ true content knowledge/academic achievement (Cook, 2009).

#3: Oral Language and Literacy Factors

This factor is one of the most complex for all students, but it plays an especially important role in ELLs’ academic performance. **Oral language and literacy development are closely connected**, but for the purposes of more specific discussion, they will be addressed separately in this section.

Oral Language Development

Schools and school systems that already emphasize oral (listening and speaking) academic language development for all their K–12 students have established an excellent foundation for supporting ELLs. Teachers can create opportunities for students to use and practice oral academic language throughout a unit of study (Bailey, 2007) as this will support them when they encounter the same language in print. The following sections summarize the process of acquiring a first language and acquiring an additional language as well as point out some considerations for teachers to keep in mind with ELLs during these developmental processes.

- **First Language Acquisition:** It is helpful to gain information on the experiences that ELLs have had in first language development from birth until they entered school (Kuhl, 2004; Kuhl, 2010; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011; Pinker, 1994). Gathering this information about whether a student’s language

development was progressing typically before they entered the school setting will help educators understand whether any issues are developmental or related to language acquisition. If children were experiencing some delays in their home language (e.g., not understood by parents, not uttering first words until well past what would be considered typical) prior to entering school, this would indicate a developmental delay rather than a language acquisition issue. Having this information would allow school teams to intervene, support, and enrich the instruction these children receive early on in their oral language development in all of their languages, and possibly prevent some of the challenges that might emerge when the children encounter print.

- **Acquisition of a Second or Additional Language:** Students acquiring a new language will go through various stages of language acquisition. The time that students spend in each stage varies greatly. Developing proficiency for social purposes in this new, additional language depends on many factors including: similarity of the language to English, amount of prior exposure to English, and temperament such as shyness or an outgoing personality. As students enter school, the focus shifts from social language proficiency to development of academic language proficiency (Bailey, 2007; Gottlieb, 2006; Krashen, 1982; Schleppegrell, 2001).

The Stages of Acquiring a New or Additional Language

As ELLs begin the process of learning a new language, they often go through a silent phase. They begin to understand some of the new language before they are able to speak it. The next phase is characterized by one or two-word utterances. Students then will be able to understand and use longer phrases in English. Later, students are able to use longer sentences with more advanced grammatical constructions. The final phase is when an ELL reaches almost native-like proficiency in their new language. ELLs who are developing language in a typical manner can be at different levels of proficiency at any given point in time for each language domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Some students may have stronger listening and speaking skills in one context, say science, and stronger reading and writing skills in another context, such as language arts. Students' language proficiency can also vary depending on the affective environment in each setting. Students often develop social language skills in the new language before their academic language proficiency, but the process is not uniform for everyone (Gottlieb, 2006). Some take longer at one stage and quickly pass through another stage. ELLs who grow up in the United States are often considered **simultaneous bilingual learners** whose full language skills would be a composite of both the home language and English (Beeman & Urow, 2012; Escamilla, 2000). A bilingual student may demonstrate strengths and challenges in either or both languages depending on instruction and usage of a student's home language and English at home and school.

Literacy Factors

- **Literacy in English:** Approximately 80% of research on reading has been done by monolingual English researchers on monolingual English children learning to read in their first language, English (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010). The principles from this monolingual research have then been applied to literacy instruction in a second or new language. It is important for school personnel (reading teachers, classroom teachers, ESL/bilingual teachers, etc.) to understand the unique differences students encounter when reading in a new language. When ELLs' literacy instruction focuses primarily on developing bottom-up phonics and phonemic awareness skills in the early grades outside of any meaningful contexts, these students often develop the ability to word-call and decode in English without comprehension of what they are reading. Likewise, the teaching and learning of fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension may look different for ELLs than for monolingual English speaking students in important ways (August & Shanahan, 2006).

It is essential then that ELLs' literacy instruction in English begin always with a meaningful context connected to the curricular themes and big ideas. Then, teachers can help students connect their experiences to the topic of the reading and build the necessary schema through visuals, experiences, previewing, and discussions (in the home language and English). Next, teachers must work on the oral language students need in order to recognize and comprehend what they are reading. The skill work can be embedded into this meaningful context rather than taught in isolation. The more connected all the elements of literacy are to the main theme, the more cohesive and meaningful literacy instruction will be for ELLs.

- **Literacy for Academic and Social Purposes:** ELLs should develop both their social as well as their academic literacy abilities in all of their languages to the greatest extent possible. Helping students develop biliteracy or multiliteracies (Cazden et al., 1996) will better prepare them for success in school, home, and the future. Developing students' literacy in social settings based on their experiences and interests provides an excellent bridge to developing the academic literacy they need in school.
- **Literacy in the Home Language:** Literacy in students' home languages supports, and can even accelerate, literacy development in the new language. It does not hinder literacy development in the new language, as many of the components of literacy, once learned in one language, have the potential to transfer across the student's other languages (August & Shanahan, 2006).
- **Reinforcing Literacy at Home:** Supporting literacy in ELLs' home languages is crucial in helping them develop their identities as readers and writers in all languages.



Professional Development Opportunity

All staff who work with ELLs can benefit from ongoing/sustained professional development on principles of acquisition of a new language. Knowing what stage of the acquisition process a student is in allows team members to more accurately interpret assessment information. In addition, helping ELLs and their families learn about the stages of acquisition of a new language allows them to better understand the developmental nature of this process and be more engaged in its advancement.

Strategies to Reinforce Literacy in the Home Language

- Working with local public libraries as well as the school library to increase the number of volumes and titles in the languages of the school community.
- Working collaboratively with public libraries to make certain that ELLs and their families have library cards.
- Working with older students to read and record books on CDs and podcasts, and then having these students present the materials to the students in the elementary grades. This can also give younger students access to biliteracy sooner.
- Having ELLs create culturally relevant dual language texts and stories (Cummins et. al., 2005) with the help of their families and community members.
- Using technology, have students develop dual language digital memoirs, with audio and visual components.
- Encouraging students and parents to discuss what students are studying in school.
- Connecting units of study to family's and community's funds of knowledge.

#4: Personal and Family Factors

Getting to know more about students' families, communities, and home life can help schools build instruction on ELLs' funds of knowledge, experiences, and skills (Moll et al., 1992) into instruction, intervention, and assessment.

- **Socioeconomic Status:** Knowing this information about a student or group of students can help inform instruction and intervention. ELLs' economic conditions are not uniform. Some students may come from middle-class or upper-socioeconomic situations prior to coming to the U.S. Others are faced with complex issues related to poverty.
- **Family Dynamics:** Gathering information about how students' families are organized and function can give insight into school behavior and achievement. Some students, for example, may have a great deal of responsibility at home or have to work outside of the home, and this can impact how much time they have to complete homework assignments. As with all factors, it is essential for schools to engage professionals who know how to conduct culturally and linguistically responsive and confidential interviews (Thorp, 1997).
- **Expectations & Aspirations:** Finding out what is expected of ELLs by their families and their communities, and knowing what they expect from themselves, can be very helpful in finding ways to support the students. Having this information can help teams avoid making generalizations or assumptions about individual students or their families. It's better to hear directly from families and students what their aspirations are. Schools, school teams, teachers, and mentors can also help support students' and families' future goals.
- **Parental Engagement:** Schools can begin to use nontraditional means to engage the families and communities of the ELLs. When schools value ELLs' home languages and cultures and respect and promote diversity and multicultural principles, families will be more likely to engage with that school. When schools support students' bicultural and multicultural identity development, families

will be more likely to feel that they are educational partners with their children's school.

- **Student Interests:** Matching instruction, assessment, intervention, etc. to students' interests can be a bridge to academic achievement and connect student motivation to learning. Exposing and introducing ELLs to new hobbies in the arts, technology, and sports can become motivating and expand their interests. It is also beneficial to ask students to introduce and share their interests, customs, and other activities with the school community.
- **Experiential Background:** At times, there may be a difference between diverse students' experiences and what is embedded in the texts and curricula used in U.S. schools. Incorporating ELLs' backgrounds can often add richness to the curriculum. A lesson on the U.S. Bill of Rights, for example, that includes a comparison among the different Bill of Rights from other countries' constitutions, would engage not only the ELLs, but would also broaden the perspective of all students.

#5: Physical and Psychological Factors

Students' physical and psychological well-being is foundational and inextricably connected to their learning and how they feel at school. Due to this reality, schools may develop a protocol for addressing issues within this factor in a systematic way with all students, including ELLs. Challenges within this factor may be present and undetected. School personnel should persist in their concern for addressing this area systemically with all students, especially those who are experiencing significant difficulties. School personnel might easily overlook many of these areas if there is no formal protocol put in place (at all grade levels) to check for these concerns in a proactive manner.

Both the physical and psychological well-being of ELLs play a significant role in their academic achievement and overall school success. For example, a safe, welcoming school environment with minimal anxiety about performing in a second or additional language is essential for ELLs to learn (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). Anxiety can interfere with learning by distracting ELLs from the linguistic input that they encounter and can lead them to withdraw from social interaction, which is critical to helping these students learn English and access academic content. ELLs may feel anxious in school for a variety of reasons, such as peer harassment, unfamiliarity with the people in the school, and with the institution of schooling in the U.S. (Pappamihel, 2002). ELLs may also experience a significant amount of stress associated with negotiating differences between their home and school culture. This acculturative stress can result in the form of feelings of isolation, anxiety, and/or depression (Berry, 2003). For this reason, teams must also consider students' stage of **acculturation** when assessing ELLs for learning, social-emotional well-being, or behavior.

Physical and Psychological Factors

- Disease or medical conditions
- Health (including dental, vision, and hearing)
- Nutrition and access to food
- Ability to access treatment for health conditions
- Mental health (including anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Social and emotional development
- Feelings of belonging to school and the wider community

Given that learning is enhanced in safe environments, it is especially important that school personnel help make students from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed, that they belong, and are valued and included in every aspect of school life. Educators should become aware of cultural differences that may explain students' forms of communication and behavior and be vigilant about creating anxiety-free educational environments (Lucas et al., 2008). ELLs' identities as bicultural or multicultural individuals should be affirmed and supported in the social and academic aspects of their school experience (Cummins et al., 2005; Osterman, 2000). In this way, schools can foster learning environments that are supportive of ELLs' academic achievement and social-emotional competence.

#6: Previous Schooling Factors

Many of the challenges that ELLs experience in school can be explained by looking back to previous schooling experiences that have been less than optimal, interrupted, or conflicting in terms of philosophy, implementation, amount of support, etc. Inconsistent support or support that is not coordinated, cohesive, and integrated can also help explain why some ELLs are not performing at expected levels. For this reason, it is helpful to gather information that is as accurate as possible about students' previous schooling at the time of intake procedures and after. Gathering information about this factor is as important when a student is moving from one school to another within the same district as it is when he or she is coming from another country.

The lack of a cohesive instructional program can result in a form of "interrupted schooling" even when students' entire experience has been within one school system. It is important to look deeper into students' previous schooling experiences, well beyond what is documented on official school records and transcripts. Often what is captured in documents does not necessarily represent the kind of support the student actually received. This reflection about the student's prior formal and informal schooling experiences will help enormously in explaining an ELL's present performance, and will aid the team in deciding how to support that student. The following are two examples of these unique experiences that are not always captured in official documents. If ELLs begin their school experience in English-only settings, instruction is often incomprehensible to them. Students may be present in the classroom, but if they do not understand most of what is said in English, they miss out on learning important concepts, ideas, and skills. Another example of a type of "interrupted schooling" is when schools emphasize reading and mathematics instruction in the early grades to the exclusion of other content areas. ELLs may not be getting exposure to science and social studies curricula until the intermediate grades. This may cause



Professional Development Opportunity

It is beneficial when all school personnel (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers, interventionists, school psychologists, counselors, social-workers, speech-language clinicians) build expertise related to the education of ELLs. Whenever possible, schools should increase the number of staff who are proficient in the languages of the ELLs as well as have an understanding of the cultural backgrounds and contexts of the families and communities represented in the school population. When the school staff possess these skills and knowledge, this helps provide access for the students and their families early on so that they do not have to wait too long to address any physical or psychological concerns they may have. When concerns arise, the linguistic and cultural expertise of the staff will allow ELLs to receive the culturally and linguistically responsive support they need and deserve in a timely manner.

students to fall very behind in these areas by the time they reach the middle grades.

#7: Cross-Cultural Factors

ELLs are going through a process of acculturation as they move daily between their home culture and school culture. Creating a supportive learning environment in which ELLs can successfully develop their multicultural identities must be a priority in any RtI² system. School teams that learn about and meaningfully incorporate students' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) into every aspect of teaching and learning for these students make it more likely that ELLs (and indeed all learners) will be successful in school (Howard, 2010). They must also be in classrooms where the adults value these diverse students and use every cultural and linguistic resource as a bridge toward high academic achievement and academic language development.

Schools and districts must work diligently to reduce and eliminate cultural and linguistic biases, prejudices, stereotypes, and any other discriminatory elements in the school environment. Free of these barriers, ELLs (and all learners) will be able to work toward reaching their potential. It is critical that diverse learners see themselves, their historical and cultural perspectives and their languages reflected in the school curriculum from PreK through Grade 12.

Asking team members, teachers, administrators, and all school personnel who work with ELLs to examine their own cultural identities along a variety of cultural variables can be an excellent way of beginning the conversation on how to develop cultural reciprocity (Harry et al., 1999a; Harry et al., 1999b; Warger, 2001) as practitioners and, consequently, how to deliver culturally responsive instruction, intervention, and assessment. This will help schools become safe places where all students will be able to freely pursue their academic, personal, intellectual, and creative goals, and will not be burdened by the weight of inequitable and prejudicial treatment, attitudes, and language.



Professional Development Opportunity

Schools can develop a process for educators and students to look at the curriculum across grade levels to evaluate the images, resources, strategies, activities, and other materials used in instruction to see if they reflect the experiences and backgrounds of the diverse student body. District and school administrators can support teachers by providing materials and time in which to produce units of study that incorporate diverse perspectives. School teams can also periodically survey school personnel, students, and families to get a sense of the school climate with regard to multicultural principles (Harry et al., 1999a; Harry et al., 1999b; Warger, 2001).

